

## GETTING A PERSPECTIVE ON SUCCESS<sup>1</sup>

*Luke XII, 15*—"A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things he possesseth."

SOME time ago a new correspondence school was opened in the middle west. It adopted the alluring title, "The Institute of Business Success," and promised everyone who enrolled valuable instruction in the art of getting on. Here is one of the exercises sent out by the Institute for the use of its students. "Pin the enclosed card on your wall so that the word Success will be on an exact level with your eyes. Stand directly in front of the card and place the palm of your right hand lightly against the back of your head. Then bring the hand quickly over the top of the head, continuing this movement until the arm is outstretched with the index finger pointing directly at the word Success. Each time this movement is completed, repeat firmly, 'Success is mine!' Continue this exercise for five minutes. N. B. Never allow yourself to fall asleep while practicing."

You and I laugh at that nonsense. We wonder why anyone would pay good money for such instruction. But the men who devised that lesson understood clearly the dominant desire of numberless people today. Above everything else they want to succeed. But what do they mean by success? In most cases, they mean winning money and the things money will buy, gaining business or professional advance-

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<sup>1</sup>Baccalaureate sermon of the fifteenth annual commencement of the Rice Institute, delivered by the Reverend James Gordon Gilkey, D.D., Minister of the South Congregational Church of Springfield, Massachusetts, in the academic court, at nine o'clock Sunday morning, June 8, 1930.

ment, and attaining social recognition. In all frankness, are not these things the ultimate ambitions of many—perhaps most of the people you know?

Sometimes the efforts made to win this success are immensely impressive. We find no such easy method as standing before a card on the wall and shouting "Success is mine!" Rather, we discover a struggle, a self-sacrifice and a grim endurance that almost pass belief. Consider this paragraph from a recent account of the life of Richard Mansfield, the eminent actor of the last generation. "At Mr. Mansfield's first appearance on a London stage it was seen at once that he was excessively nervous. When later in the play he was supposed to sit down at a piano and strike a few chords, he fainted dead away. After the performance the stage manager discharged him with the angry comment, 'You are the most nervous man I ever saw!' But the young actor had not fainted from nervousness. He had fainted from hunger. For three days he had not had a bite to eat. In speaking later of those early struggles in London Mr. Mansfield said, 'When night came I used to walk the streets. If I was lucky enough to have a penny in my pocket I would go to a stand on a corner and buy a hot baked potato. Then I would put the potato in my pocket to warm my frozen fingers, and when the potato was as cold as I was, I ate it for my supper!'" Scores of men and women of our day are making sacrifices equally great to reach the goal they have set for themselves. Such is the price human beings will pay for success.

But do all the people who pay the price win the success? There is one of the tragedies of life. Richard Mansfield endured hardship for years, and then became one of the undisputed leaders of his profession. But there were hundreds of other actors who made sacrifices equally great only

to end their career playing small parts in the provinces. That boy of today who is pointing at the card pinned on his wall and muttering grimly "Success is mine!" may eventually win the fortune on which he has set his heart. But what shall we say about the hundreds of other boys who also buy cards, also practice auto-suggestion, and then remain underpaid clerks for the rest of their days? The unhappy fact is that though everyone wants success and though most people work hard to win it, only a few people actually get it. The great majority of men and women must adjust themselves, willingly or unwillingly, to a life of ordinary attainment. Furthermore, even the individuals who achieve eminence soon discover that they cannot hold it indefinitely. A day comes and usually comes all too soon, when they must watch some rival take their place as the richest man, the cleverest doctor, the most successful business executive in the community. Vachel Lindsay has recently published a little verse about success and failure in modern New York which suggests this truth vividly:

There's a new king in Babylon  
Every hour.  
There's a new queen in Babylon  
Every year.  
And the kings go down  
And the queens go down  
With a heartbreak  
And a terrible cry of fear.

In such a world how can a man gain serenity of spirit? How can he learn to live above success and above failure, so that no matter which of the two comes to him he will retain his inward quietness and his happiness in living? A few individuals seem to have solved this problem and discovered this secret. They make, of course, every effort to succeed. All through life they keep hoping that success will come to

them, and they try persistently to be worthy of it. But if their ventures fail, or if an initial success turns to failure, they still retain their poise, their self-confidence, and their joy in life. Such individuals have, obviously, a perspective on success and failure which the ordinary person lacks. What is that perspective? How can you and I get it?

There are several facts about success and failure which centuries of experience have finally made plain. When we recognize these facts and remind ourselves frequently of them we gradually acquire the perspective on our own achievement which all of us so greatly need. The first fact is that many people manufacture a wholly false sense of failure. They persuade themselves that they have made a sorry record, while the truth is they have done remarkably well.

Perhaps the commonest way of creating a false sense of failure is to compare ourselves with the wrong people. Here, for example, is a young man who on graduating from college became a teacher in a public school. One day he starts to compare himself with a classmate who on leaving college went into stock speculation and speedily accumulated a fortune. What a contrast between the teacher's meager salary and the speculator's immense income! What a difference between their homes, their prospects for the future, and the advantages they give their children! As the teacher begins to draw these unhappy comparisons he generates within his own mind the conviction that he has been a total failure. But nothing of the kind is true. That teacher is, as numberless people could testify, one of the outstanding successes in his profession. The source of his unhappiness and his sense of failure lies in the fact that he has compared himself with the wrong person, with a man whose career is entirely different from his own. One man is engaged in public

service, the other is busy making (or losing) a private fortune. One man takes part of his remuneration in intangible things—in friendships, in the chance to touch the life of children, in the opportunity to exert an influence on the future. The other man takes his rewards almost exclusively in cash. The two careers are entirely different, and it is as futile to compare them as it is to try to estimate the relative merits of a Beethoven symphony and a beef-steak dinner. If you want to estimate accurately your own achievement, you must compare yourself with people of your own age, your own advantages, your own type of work, your own native gifts, and your own actual opportunities. Then, and only then, can you determine whether—everything considered—you are a success or failure. When a man stands in front of a pebble he seems enormous. When he stands in front of a mountain he seems insignificant. If he wants to gauge his true size he must stand beside a representative of his own species.

Another common way of creating a false sense of failure is to take records and statistics too seriously. Ours is the first generation that has learned to make charts and graphs, and the probability is that most of us have played too long and too solemnly with these new toys. We all realize, of course, that there are some facts and some situations which can be clearly and accurately pictured by curved lines, or by a maze of colored dots on a sheet of white cardboard. But there are other realities which such devices can never record. Here, for instance, is a young doctor who has been counting up the number of calls he made last year and comparing it with the number of calls he has made this year. To his consternation he finds that he made far more visits a year ago than he is making now. The lines on his chart make that fact all too plain. Does this mean he is losing his place

among the physicians of the community? Does it indicate that within five years he will be listed among the second-raters? The chart may mean that, and it may mean nothing of the kind. Perhaps the true explanation of the situation lies in a group of factors which the chart is powerless to reveal. Perhaps the decline in the number of the doctor's visits may be due to the fact that the general health of the community is better this year than it was last, or the fact that a new doctor has moved into the neighborhood, or the fact that faith-healing has had a sudden vogue, or the fact that the doctor's own prescriptions are so effective that his patients are steadily kept in the best of health! It is a difficult task to collect figures and draw diagrams. It is even more difficult to make the diagrams tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

When we turn from the work of the day to the question of the influence that work will exert on the future, the inherent limitations of graphs and statistics become even more evident. What set of figures can suggest the contribution a poem, a picture, or a fine play makes to the inner life of successive generations? What collection of red pins and blue dots can picture accurately the relative influence of a great teacher and a dishonest mayor? Some months ago two heavyweight boxers pummelled each other with due consideration for twenty minutes, and then divided nearly two million dollars as a reward for the evening's efforts. Many years ago a young artist named Rembrandt spent weeks perfecting a picture called "The Night Watch" for which he received only three thousand dollars. Look at the comparative financial ratings—two million dollars for a prize fight, and three thousand dollars for a picture that will inspire the generations. Do figures and bank balances tell the whole story after all?

A second fact we should bear in mind as we discuss success and failure is this. The outcome of every human venture is determined by the interplay of many factors, only a few of which are under our control. We may do our best in a given situation and emphatically deserve success. But the uncontrollable factors in that situation may conspire against us and eventually bring about a stinging defeat. Conversely, we may find success literally given to us, pushed into our hands by forces which we did not set in motion and the operations of which actually eluded our attention.

Some years ago a Boston minister spent the summer cruising off the coast of Newfoundland. One day he visited an unfrequented harbor on the Straits of Belle Isle, and there found a fisherman in the depths of poverty. This fisherman tried to sell the minister many things, among them a pork barrel filled with a soapy substance which had been taken from inside a dead whale. He offered the barrel and its contents for twenty-five dollars, and then suggested he would accept a bargain price of only fifteen dollars. But the minister explained he was not interested. As a matter of fact, neither man had the slightest idea what the substance in the barrel was. But when, some days later, the minister returned to civilization carrying with him a fragment of that material, he learned to his astonishment that it was pure ambergris and worth nearly one thousand dollars a pound. There was a fortune of a quarter of a million dollars waiting in that pork barrel in the fisherman's shack! At once the minister started back for that lonely harbor, hoping to reach it before the winter storms began, and planning to tell the fisherman his good luck. But the winds were contrary and the season late, and it was the following summer before the minister sailed into that harbor again. He went at once to the fisherman and asked where the pork barrel was. The

fisherman seemed puzzled, and it was several minutes before he recalled the events of the preceding summer. Then he explained that the soapy substance in the barrel had gradually developed a strong odor to which his wife objected so vigorously that for her Christmas present he had dumped the barrel and its contents into the sea. What was responsible for that loss of a fortune? Certainly nothing for which the fisherman could be blamed. In the final analysis it was the direction of the wind the preceding summer which was responsible. Had it not blown persistently in the wrong direction the minister would have succeeded in reaching the harbor and telling the fisherman that he was a rich man. Or, taking a masculine point of view, we might say that the fisherman's wife was to blame. Had she not made such a fuss at Christmas the ambergris would still have been in the barrel!

Such incidents—and they could be multiplied almost indefinitely—reveal one of the highly significant truths about success and failure. Success and failure are not necessarily a true index of a man's ability or his deserts. Numberless people, gifted and hard-working, have been cheated out of fame and fortune by some twist of circumstances as the one that kept the Newfoundland fisherman in dismal poverty. Meantime other people, no more able and certainly no more deserving, have been caught up and lifted into positions of comfort and eminence by forces which they neither created nor foresaw. Years ago Rudyard Kipling put into a poem this memorable couplet:

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two impostors just the same . . .

Kipling calls them impostors. To a certain extent he is right. The people who fail ought to remember this. The people who succeed might do well to recall it too.



Another fact we should bear in mind as we struggle for attainment is this: that the people who miss fame and fortune can still be happy, radiantly happy. They can do so for the simple reason that the major sources of happiness lie open to everyone, even to the people whom the world counts failures. The most obvious of these sources of happiness is human companionship and human love, particularly the companionship and love of one's home. How many parents, perplexed by disappointment and continuing poverty, have found life sweet because of their love for each other and their children's love for them! How many other people, laden with wealth and fame but living in utter loneliness, would exchange their tinsel treasures for the true riches they see in the homes of their neighbors! In one of John Fiske's letters to his wife he reports a conversation which he had with Herbert Spencer, the great English philosopher. Mr. Fiske was visiting Mr. Spencer in England, and Mr. Spencer made the natural inquiries about Mrs. Fiske and the children in America. That night Mr. Fiske sent his wife this account of the ensuing incident. "I showed Spencer the little picture of our picnic-wagon with the children inside. When I realized how lonely he must be without any wife and babies of his own, and how solitary he is in all his greatness I had to pity him. Then as I watched him studying that picture and gazing at our children's faces I said to myself, 'That wagon-load of youngsters is worth more than all the philosophy ever concocted, from Aristotle to Spencer inclusive!'" You count yourself a failure? Ask yourself if you have not had—after all—some of the most durable satisfactions of life, some of the deepest joys known to human hearts.

Another major source of happiness for innumerable people—successful or unsuccessful—is their daily work. Long ago they learned to do it well, and now the mere act

of doing it creates within them a never-ending sense of satisfaction. We sometimes wonder why men in middle life who have accumulated a competence still keep working. We wonder why musicians who have abandoned their public careers continue to practice, why amateur poets continue to write verses, and why men with a mechanical bent deliberately spend their occasional holidays tinkering with machines. The reason is the same in all cases, and is familiar to anyone who knows human nature. Some of our keenest satisfactions and deepest joys grow out of the act of doing the thing we have learned to do, and now do well. Whether we achieve fame and fortune in the process makes no difference. Happiness is ours, irrespective of external recognitions and rewards. In his *Spoon River Anthology* Edgar Lee Masters tells the story of a country violinist who in spite of the fact that he never accumulated money or land still lived a radiantly happy life. By doing the thing he could do and loved to do he kept abiding joy in his heart.

The earth keeps some vibration going  
There in your heart, and that is you.  
How could I till my forty acres,  
Not to speak of getting more,  
With a medley of horns, bassoons, and piccolos  
Stirring in my brain by crows and robins  
And the creak of a windmill?  
I never started to plow  
That someone did not stop in the road  
And take me away to a dance or a picnic.  
I ended up my forty acres,  
A broken fiddle, a thousand memories,  
And not a single regret.

What we have said so far has no connection with religious beliefs. It applies with equal directness to those who count themselves Christian, and to those who do not. There are two additional convictions about success and failure which those of us who follow Jesus' teachings hold. To begin

with, we believe with Jesus that a man's true attainment is never measured by what he has. Rather it is measured by what he is. This is one of the basic beliefs about life held by Christians. It explains why through all the centuries true followers of Jesus have been vastly more concerned with building a character than with accumulating a fortune. How clearly this emphasis on inner rather than outer wealth appears in the sayings of Jesus! Repeatedly He warns His followers against covetousness, insisting that a man's true life does not grow out of the number of material things in his possession. He told the story of a property-owner whose one aim was to pile up more wealth, accumulate additional grain and buildings. Jesus said that in God's estimation this man was a fool? Why? Because his eyes were fixed on the less important side of life. Repeatedly Jesus urged the people about Him to stop thinking so constantly about material treasure to be laid up in this world, and to think more about spiritual treasure—nobility of soul—which could be carried over into the world to come. Granted that our modern civilization is different from the one Jesus knew, granted that the application of Jesus' ideas in the modern world is a task beset with bewildering difficulties, we Christians are still convinced that Jesus' scale of values was fundamentally sound, and that modern America—dominated by a passion for material success and beset by fear of material failure—bitterly needs the corrective emphasis which Jesus' teaching brings. If all of us count money and fame the greatest things in life and then set our hearts on winning them at any cost, most of us are headed for disappointment and heartache, and the civilization we are building is headed for disaster. Everyone cannot win great wealth or wide attention, no matter how persistently we tinker with the machinery of life. Most of us fill ordinary positions and

accept ordinary remunerations. Only when we realize with Jesus that the building of a noble character is vastly more important than the acquisition of money and fame, that what a man is counts far more than what a man has, can we find with Jesus that inner peace which the world can neither give nor take away.

The other conviction which we as Christians hold is this. We believe with Jesus that God's love, God's care, and God's purpose surround each human life. As soon as a man begins to live at his best—meeting life's situations with his keenest intelligence, his bravest courage, his most generous kindness—he opens his life to the divine love and care, and aligns himself with the divine purpose. It makes no difference who the man is, what religious beliefs he holds or does not hold, or what his previous moral record has been. The moment he begins living at his best, his life and God's life begin to merge, and like a rivulet joining a river flow onward together. When this happens God leads that man to the place He wants him to fill, the work He wants him to do, and the people He wants him to help. There are of course other forces far less wise and far less kind at work in our strange universe. The stern processes of Nature march on their relentless way. The creative power of other human beings makes it possible for them to initiate developments that affect disastrously the course of many lives. The curious factor of coincidence must always be reckoned with. Yet in, around, and beyond these other forces are the love, the care, and the purpose of God. The Divine Power is forever at work, sometimes accelerating and sometimes resisting the developments already initiated in human lives. Like the tide, the divine purpose sometimes moves with us and sometimes against us, but silent and unobserved it is always flowing below the surface of life.

What does this mean for our estimates of success and failure? It means this. When we find our plans blocked and our hopes frustrated, we Christians ask if—perhaps—God is in the experience. What if He is holding us away from one career in order to bring us later to a better one? When we find ourselves compelled to stay in some small corner, apparently failing there as Jesus seemed to fail in Galilee, we ask again if—perhaps—God is in that experience. What if He is using us in a small place as He once used Jesus in a small place, to set loose in the hearts of others forces for good that will never die? The silent and the unseen tides of God—how the sting goes out of failure when we begin to think of them!

We cannot look beyond  
The spectrum's mystic bar,  
Beyond the violet light  
Yea, other lights there are,  
And waves that touch us not  
Voyaging far.

Vast, ordered forces whirl  
Invisible, unfelt,  
Their language less than sound  
Their names unselt.  
Suns cannot brighten them  
Nor white heat melt.

Here in the clammy dark  
We dig as dwarfs for coal,  
Yet One Mind fashioned it  
And us, a luminous whole:  
As lastly thou shalt see,  
Thou, O my Soul!

JAMES GORDON GILKEY



VIEW OF THE STATUE FROM THE CAMPUS

